

cm mini reviews

A rapid-fire round-up of sample libraries, ROMplers and music gear

Spitfire Audio Albion One £383

Web www.timespace.com
Format PC/Mac, Kontakt 5/Player

The latest addition to the Albion line, which also includes the less 'general purpose' Albions II (9/10, **cm185**), III and IV, marks a reboot for Spitfire's original full orchestral Kontakt library and its side dishes. Built on almost 50,000 samples of a 109-piece orchestra plus full percussion section (orchestral drums, taikos, metals, etc), recorded to 2" tape at Air Studios via vintage ribbon mics, Neve Montserrat preamps and the world's biggest Neve 88R desk, Albion One weighs in at an impressive 54GB (90GB uncompressed).

The orchestra is provided in full sections and High, Middle and Low breakdowns, with the usual array of long and short keyswitchable articulations, plus string runs and legato patches. Supplementary to all that, the Darwin Percussion Ensemble patches fire up Spitfire's percussion-orientated Kickstart engine, as used in The Grange (9/10, **cm216**), while Stephenson's Steam Band (recycling the raw orchestral

samples as fuel for a ton of synth-style patches) and Brunel Loops (tempo-synced, repitchable layered rhythm loop kits) now run in the excellent eDNA engine, as previously encountered in eDNA Earth (10/10, **cm211**).

Clearly the main draw here, though, is the new orchestral material, which sounds absolutely magnificent. The strings are lush and expressive, the brass is tight and punchy, the winds are airy and sweet, and the fully sampled legatos are supremely smooth and convincing. Tweakable parameters include dynamics and release times, convolution reverb and microphone mix (Close, Decca tree, Ambient and Overhead), while the Ostinatum sequencer makes light work of programming riffs, and the nifty Punch Cog menu enables customisation of individual notes and their round robins.

The library as a whole is harder, cleaner, and more consistent and modern-sounding than its predecessor. Indeed, Albion One doesn't necessarily feel like a replacement for Albion, which still has its own thoroughly desirable sonic qualities, but rather a bigger, brighter



alternative – in fact, you get a small selection of sounds from the original included, which is good news for those who don't already own it.

Albion One is Spitfire's greatest orchestral package to date, combining exemplary ease of use and a knock-out sample bank to stunning effect.

10/10

VirSyn Poseidon Synth £10

Web www.virsyn.com
Format iPad

We must confess to having totally forgotten about VirSyn's weird and wonderful "spectral modelling synth", Poseidon, which scored a solid 8/10 way back in **cm114**. With the recent release of the iPad version, some eight years later, however, we're glad to have it brought back into our line of sight, as it's one of VirSyn's more esoteric instrumental offerings.

An additively generated waveform called a "spectral sound model" serves as the source signal for the oscillator. This is essentially a 512-partial additive construction, shown in the main Wave page of the GUI as a 3D spectral waveform, with colour representing amplitude. Unlike the desktop version, you can't load in your own samples for resynthesis, but that's far from the end of the world, as a well-stocked library of them is built in, comprising all manner of sampled synth waveforms, instruments, vocals, environmental sounds and more.

Like a wavetable synth, the movement of the playhead through the spectral model can be controlled and modulated by various sources (LFOs, envelopes, keytrack, etc), and is fully –

and very smoothly – animated in the Wave display, which can also be zoomed and rotated via multitouch.

As well as its main tonal qualities, the spectral model also has a noise component, and both can be manipulated using a range of controls, including mixing between the two, reducing the number of partials, modulating the brightness of the sound, and "blurring" the frequency and level transitions between partials. Beyond that, it's fairly standard synth fare, with two LFOs, two envelopes, the same high-powered 32-step arpeggiator seen in other VirSyn synths, a wicked multimode filter (featuring the morphable Z-Plane-style PoleZero mode), seven very capable effects modules, and randomisation buttons scattered throughout. The colour-coded tabs of the Synth and FX pages work really well, keeping the two most important controls for each element (LFO, filter,



Spectrum, etc) constantly visible, while the strip at the bottom hosts the rest of the parameters for the currently selected element.

Poseidon Synth's primary areas of proficiency are pads, ambiences, textures and otherworldly effects of all kinds, from pure and melodious to jagged and inharmonic; but it's also pretty good at basses, leads and other more 'mono' tones. A hugely creative iPad synth at a very reasonable price.

9/10

Output Audio Exhale \$239

Web www.timespace.com
Format PC/Mac, Kontakt 5/Player

Boldly proclaiming itself “the world’s first truly modern vocal engine”, Exhale sets itself up for a fall before it’s even been installed. You’re probably imagining some elaborate ‘next gen Vocaloid’-type arrangement that pushes Kontakt scripting to its limits, opening up a world of solo vocal design based on an immense library of words and phonemes, right? Well... no. What we have here is a very well-conceived and good-looking but in no way revolutionary scripted Kontakt instrument built to do fairly conventional things to a diverse 9GB library of non-lyrical human voice samples, both solo and ensemble-based. Think ‘vocals’ in the most abstract sense, and you’re in the right space.

The many recordings in Exhale’s 9GB soundbank are used in three distinct playback engine modes, each with its own bank of presets – 500 in total, complete with tag-based filtering. Note mode maps two independent sounds, chosen from a list of one-shots, sustained “pads”

and tempo-synced loops, across the keyboard; Loop mode gives you 40 banks of 13 tempo-synced loops each; and Slices mode lets you play one of 40 phrases, each sliced across 13 notes for REX file-style triggering. Controls such as envelopes, sample start point, Reverse and Formant Shift round out this top Source section.

Next comes the FX Engine, consisting of a wave- and step-based modulation sequencer (with a wealth of preset shapes plus an auxiliary step sequencer for modulating the global clock rate), six effects for modulation by said sequencer (Volume, Pan, Filter, Phaser, formant filter and Saturate), and seven insert effects (compression, delay, pitchshifter, etc).

The Main screen houses four Macro sliders, each assignable to up to six parameters from across the instrument. Every one of Exhale’s presets makes good use of them, so you could potentially get your money’s worth without ever



going any further than the front page.

While the marketing might be meaningless hyperbole, Exhale is, thankfully, superb. You can’t really make ‘songs’ with it, but as a genuinely inspirational vocal-based ‘synth’ for dance, electronic, ambient and soundtrack production, it’s a breath of fresh air.

9/10

Native Instruments Symphony Series – String Ensemble £429

Web www.native-instruments.com
Format PC/Mac, Kontakt 5/Player

After Brass Solo (9/10, **cm222**) and Brass Ensemble, NI’s new Symphony Series instrument captures a 60-piece string orchestra as a 34GB sample library (44GB uncompressed), and puts it under the command of a straightforward interface.

Five NKIs are included: Violins, Violas, Cellos, Basses and String Ensemble. The first four load with the full range of keyswitched articulations, while the Ensemble has fewer articulations but puts all four sections at your fingertips.

The Kontakt scripting powering String Ensemble features true auto-divisi (for keeping player counts accurate with polyphonic playing), polyphonic legato/portamento, three mic channels plus stereo mix, mod wheel-assigned Dynamics control, automatic note repetition and accenting, and more. It’s amazing how easy the super-intuitive GUI makes it to put together rich, detailed and astonishingly realistic string parts, and it never sounds anything less than phenomenal. We’re a bit shaken by the price, though...

9/10



Decksaver NI Maschine and Ableton Push covers £40

Web www.decksaver.com

Based in West Yorkshire, and “drawing on 45 years in plastics manufacturing”, Decksaver make hard covers for turntables, mixers, synths, grooveboxes and MIDI controllers. The Producer range includes bespoke covers for, amongst other things, the NI Maschine family, and the original Ableton Push (we expect the Push 2 version to arrive soon).

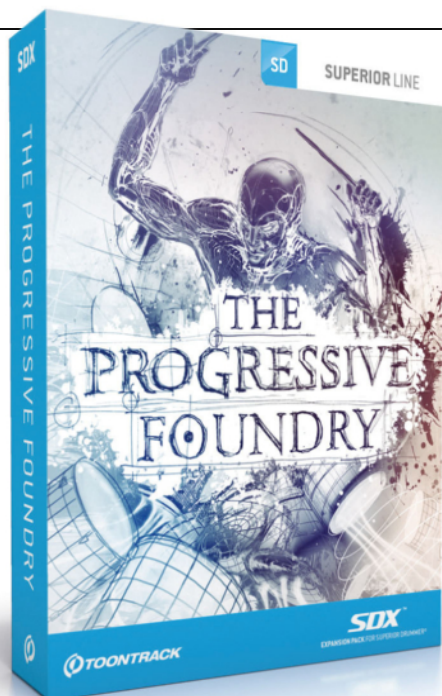
The transparent polycarbonate used by Decksaver is light and incredibly tough – we didn’t take an axe to them or anything, but standing on them, flexing them and flinging them around made no impression whatsoever. The fit and finish can’t be faulted, either – they snap into place cleanly and tightly, with all ports and sockets remaining uncovered.

Whether you want to keep the dust off your controller in the studio or protect it from spillages and impacts on stage, Decksaver is a great-looking, 100% effective, slightly pricey solution. The only problem is that once you’ve bought one for your MIDI controller, you’ll want them for the rest of your gear, too.

9/10



Soundware round-up



Toontrack The Progressive Foundry SDX £99

Are you a digital drummer with 63GB of free space on your samples drive? Then you have to find a hundred quid and fill it with Progressive Foundry.

Recorded at Sing Sing Studios, Melbourne, this rock-orientated (but actually more versatile than that suggests) Superior 2 expansion consists of five full kits by DW, Ludwig, Pearl and Yamaha, plus loads of extra individual elements. The whole thing sounds phenomenal, plays and mixes beautifully, and deserves to go down in music technology as one of the finest virtual drum kit collections ever made.

www.timespace.com

10/10

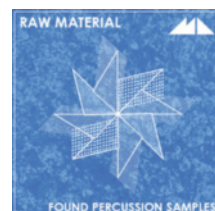
Mode Audio

Raw Material £15

We do like a good found-sound library here at **cm**, and Raw Material is a cracker, rolling 322 source samples into 19 percussion kits in the usual Mode Audio range of sampler formats (Reason, Live, FL Studio, etc). We received the Live version, which uses Drum Racks and also includes five handy Audio Effect Racks. The samples comprise recordings of a range of household 'stuff' – kitchen utensils and appliances, food, wooden things, metal things, water and much more – and are bright, punchy and surprisingly diverse, sonically speaking. Recommended!

www.modeaudio.com

9/10



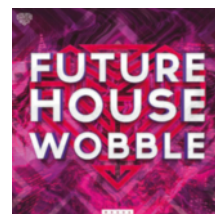
Diamond Samples

Future House Wobble £14

Fusing future house and wobble (as the kids are wont to do right now, we're told), these 440 drum, bass, piano and FX loops (125bpm) and hits are fair crackling with energy. The highlights are the "wobble" bass one-shots and loops – it's just a shame there aren't more of the latter (and arbitrarily putting a third of them in a folder named Bonus Bass Loops won't fool anyone). We also like the 25 processed Amen breaks. A fun and well put together library at a very fair price.

sounds.beatport.com

8/10



Sample Magic

Synthwave 2 £35

The follow-up to Synthwave (8/10, **cm**212) is basically (much!) more of the same: 1.4GB of 80s-style synth basslines, leads, pads, chords and effects, drum machine beats, and mini construction kits, plus a pile of one-shot drums and sampler patches, and over 200 MIDI files. A tasty roster of classic instruments was used to put it all together, and we'd suggest that the overarching theme is more 'movie soundtrack' than 'pop' – think *Tron*, *Terminator*, *Miami Vice*, etc. Oozing retro credibility.

www.samplemagic.com

9/10



Samplephonics

African Rhythms £29

Performed by percussionist Ruca Rebordão, African Rhythm's 236 percussion loops (plus occasional vocals) focus primarily on maseмба, semba and kilapanga styles, but with forays into 3/4 and 6/4 time, too. The instrumentation includes congas, udu, talking drum and tabor, and 44 one-shots are supplied. Rebordão's playing is sublime, and the production is clean but organic; and while many of the loops are variations on the same themes, that's inevitable with such a musicologically authentic library. The panning on most of the one-shots, though, isn't helpful.

www.samplephonics.com

8/10



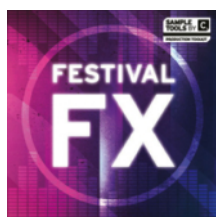
Sample Tools by Cr2

Festival FX £13

Another “builds, drops and breakdowns” pack from Cr2, this time of the ‘large format’ EDM and house variety. The 287 samples (you also get 29 Sylenth1 presets and 40 minutes of tutorial videos) include risers, falls, sub drops, drum fills, crashes (forwards and reversed) and more, as well as eight mini construction kits. The production can’t be faulted, and neither can the value for money, but if you already own Mainroom FX (10/10, **cm211**), you’ll feel more than a touch of déjà vu with this one and can probably pass.

sounds.beatport.com

9/10



Big Fish Audio

Vintage Rhythm Section £139

A sort of virtual band for Kontakt 5 and Kontakt Player, Vintage Rhythm Section (7.4GB) comprises separate multisampled drum kit, bass, guitar, keyboard and percussion instruments (67 NKIs in total, and 19 multis), divided into 60s and 70s-style R&B, Jazz and Rock subsets. The drum kit GUI takes the form of a 12-channel mixer with reverb and EQ, while the others share a common interface, including controls for tape saturation, distortion and delay. The recordings faithfully capture the sounds of their era, making this a flexible, authentic solution for media composers.

www.timespace.com

8/10



F9 Audio

Grid v1.0: 80s Future Retro £30

The first in a set of three libraries from F9, Grid v1.0 contains 451 80s-inspired loops and 176 one-shots, along with a multitude of fully developed sampler patches (including the intriguing Snare Drum Designer and the overhyped ‘Riffmatic’ instruments) and REX files. It’s 4.5GB in total, with the actual samples taking up 1.1GB. Drawing on a what’s-what of vintage synths and beatboxes, tastefully programmed and processed, this is a very well produced and confidently presented pack that gives you an awful lot for your money.

www.loopmasters.com

9/10



Loopmasters

Dubwise Vol 2 £30

Dubalon’s second outing on Loopmasters delivers 1GB of classic-style dub loops, hits and multis in various formats. All the expected instrumentation is present and correct – drums, percussion, bass, guitars, brass, melodica, keys, FX and vocals – and the performances and production are on point. While it’s obvious that everything here has been culled from a series of full projects, there’s more than enough variety for that not to be restrictive. Our only issue is that the brass loops sound rather too programmed.

www.loopmasters.com

9/10



FXpansion

Modern Retro £85

With 33GB of samples (16.5GB compressed with BFD3) and 56 presets at its core, Modern Retro expands BFD with two full kits – a 1997 Sonor Designer and a late 90s Tama Starclassic – plus Ludwig and Tama snares, and Zildjian, Sabian, Paiste, UFIP and Turkish cymbals. A huge number of velocity layers are used (up to 300 per articulation for the snares!), adding up to a remarkable degree of detail and playability. The inclusion of brush or hotrod alternatives for most kit elements justifies the pricetag.

www.fxexpansion.com

8/10



Sample Magic

Eclectic Electronic £35

“Part house, part disco, part synth pop”, Eclectic Electronic aims to encapsulate the panoply of today’s four-square dance music in a stylistically unifying sample library that manages to find a distinct voice of its own in the process. The main events are the 20 fabulous stemmed drum loops and 20 ‘inspiration’ construction kits, but the one-shots and multisampled synths and basses ought to prove useful, too. Bold, bouncy and full of mix-ready sounds, this is a quality package.

www.samplemagic.com

8/10



Native Instruments

Cavern Floor £44

There’s no shortage of techno Maschine add-ons available from NI and others, but Cavern Floor finds its niche by sounding somewhat ‘bigger’ than its peers. That vital techno darkness and funk are still there, but many of its 45 kits (incorporating 47 Drum Synths, 35 Massive presets and ten Monark patches) have a notably epic feel to them. Much of this is down to the samples and instrument presets used, but the effects processing also plays a large part and gives plenty of scope for customisation, making it easy to take Cavern Floor into other non-techno territories, too.

www.native-instruments.com

8/10



Samplephonics

Braindance £35

Sonic and rhythmic experimentation is the name of the game with this outré set of garagey electronica loops and one-shots. We’re talking jittery beats (many of them featuring the same sidestick sound, we couldn’t help but notice), wonky modulated basslines, off-kilter chords, nutty FX and more besides. It amounts to 250 loops, 161 shots and a fair few sampler patches, all exuding a cool, idiosyncratic production style that certainly grabs the attention. Hopefully, Samplephonics’ claim that they’ll “literally make your brain dance” is exaggerated, however.

www.samplephonics.com

8/10

